

## CHAPTER XXXIX

Notwithstanding his brave threats made behind Angela's back, about forcing her to marry him in the teeth of any opposition that she could offer, George reached home that night very much disheartened about the whole business. How was he to bow the neck of this proud woman to his yoke, and break the strong cord of her allegiance to her absent lover. With many girls it might have been possible to find a way, but Angela was not an ordinary girl. He had tried, and Lady Bellamy had tried, and they had both failed, and as for Philip he would take no active part in the matter. What more could be done? Only one thing that he could think of, he could force Lady Bellamy to search her finer brains for a fresh expedient. Acting upon this idea, he at once despatched a note to her, requesting her to come and see him at Isleworth on the following morning.

That night passed very ill for the love-lorn George. Angela's vigorous and imaginative expression of her entire loathing of him had pierced even the thick hide of his self-conceit, and left him sore as a whipped hound, altogether too sore to sleep. When Lady Bellamy arrived on the following morning, she found him marching up and down the dining-room, in the worst of his bad tempers, and that was a very shocking temper indeed. His light blue eyes were angry and bloodshot, his general appearance slovenly to the last degree, and a red spot burned upon each sallow cheek.

"Well, George, what is the matter? You don't look quite so happy as a lover should."

He grunted by way of answer.

"Has the lady been unkind, failed to appreciate your advances, eh?"

"Now look here, Anne," he answered, savagely, "if I have to put up with things from that confounded girl, I am not going to stand your jeers, so stop them once and for all."

"It is very evident that she has been unkind. Supposing that instead of abusing me you tell me the details. No doubt they are interesting," and she settled herself in a low chair, and glanced at him keenly from under her heavy eyelids.

Thus admonished, George proceeded to give her such a version of his melancholy tale as best suited him, needless to say not a full one, but his hearer's imagination easily supplied the gaps, and, as he proceeded, a slow smile crept over her face as she conjured up the suppressed details of the scene in the lane.

"Curse you! what are you laughing at? You came here to listen, not laugh," broke out George furiously, when he saw it.

She made no answer, and he continued his thrilling tale without

comment on her part.

"Now," he said, when it was finished, "what is to be done?"

"There is nothing to be done; you have failed to win her affections, and there is an end of the matter."

"Then you mean I must give it up?"

"Yes, and a very good thing too, for the ridiculous arrangement that you have entered into with Philip would have half-ruined you, and you would be tired of the girl in a month."

"Now, look you here, Anne," said George, in a sort of hiss, and standing over her in a threatening attitude, "I have suspected for some time that you were playing me false in this business, and now I am sure of it. You have put the girl up to treating me like this, you treacherous snake; you have struck me from behind, you Red Indian in petticoats. But, look here, I will be square with you; you shall not have all the laugh on your side."

"George, you must be mad."

"You shall see whether I am mad or not. Did you see what the brigands did to a fellow they caught in Greece the other day for whom they wanted ransom? First, they sent his ear to his friends, then his nose,

then his foot, and, last of all, his head--all by post, mark you.

Well, dear Anne, that is just how I am going to pay you out. You shall have a week to find a fresh plan to trap the bird you have frightened, and, if you find none, first, I shall post one of those interesting letters that I have yonder to your husband--anonymously, you know--not a very compromising one, but one that will pique his curiosity and set him making inquiries; then I shall wait another week."

Lady Bellamy could bear it no longer. She sprang up from her chair, pale with anger.

"You fiend in human form, what is it, I wonder, that has kept me so long from destroying you and myself too? Oh! you need not laugh; I have the means to do it, if I choose: I have had them for twenty years."

George laughed again, hoarsely.

"Quite penny-dreadful, I declare. But I don't think you will come to that; you would be afraid, and, if you do, I don't much care--I am pretty reckless, I can tell you."

"For your threats," she went on, without heeding him, "I care nothing, for, as I tell you, I have their antidote at hand. You have known me for many years, tell me, did you ever see my nerve desert me? Do you suppose that I am a woman who would bear failure when I could choose

death? No, George, I had rather pass into eternity on the crest of the wave of my success, such as it has been, and let it break and grind me to powder there, or else bear me to greater heights. All that should have been a woman's better part in the world you have destroyed in me. I do not say that it was altogether your fault, for an evil destiny bound me to you, and it must seem odd to you when I say that, knowing you for what you are, I still love you. And to fill up this void, to trample down those surging memories, I have made myself a slave to my ambition, and the acquisition of another power that you cannot understand. The man you married me to is rich and a knight to-day. I made him so. If I live another twenty years, his wealth shall be colossal and his influence unbounded, and I will be one of the most powerful women in the kingdom. Why do you suppose that I so fear your treachery? Do you think that I should mind its being known that I had thrown aside that poor fig-leaf, virtue--the green garment that marks a coward or a fool; for, mark you, all women, or nearly all, would be vicious if they dared. Fear and poverty of spirit restrain them, not virtue. Why, it is by their vices, properly managed, that women have always risen, and always will rise. To be really great, I think that a woman must be vicious with discrimination, and I respect vice accordingly. No, it is not that I fear. I am afraid because I have a husband whose bitter resentment is justly piling up against me from year to year, who only lies in wait for an opportunity to destroy me. Nor is he my only enemy. In his skilful hands, the letters you possess can, as society is in this country, be used so as to make me powerless. Yes, George, all the good in me is dead; the mad love I

have given you is hourly outraged, and yet I cannot shake it off.

\_There\_ alone my strength fails me, and I am weak as a child. Only the power to exercise my will, my sense of command over the dullards round me, and a yet keener pleasure you do not know of, are left to me. If these are taken away, what will my life be? A void, a waste, a howling wilderness, a place where I will not stay! I had rather tempt the unknown. Even in Hell there must be scope for abilities such as mine!"

She paused awhile, as if for an answer, and then went on--

"And as for you, poor creature that you are, words cannot tell how I despise you. You discard me and my devotion, to follow a nature, in its way, it is true, greater even than my own, representing the principle of good, as I represent the principle of evil, but one to which yours is utterly abhorrent. Can you mix light with darkness, or filthy oil with water? As well hope to merge your life, black as it is with every wickedness, with that of the splendid creature you would defile. Do you suppose that a woman such as she will ever be really faithless to her love, even though you trap her into marriage? Fool, her heart is as far above you as the stars; and without a heart a woman is a husk that none but such miserables as yourself would own. But go on--dash yourself against a white purity that will, in the end, blind and destroy you. Dree your own doom! I will find you expedients; it is my business to obey you. You shall marry her, if you will, and taste of the judgment that will follow. Be still, I will bear no more of your insolence to-day." And she swept out of the room, leaving

George looking somewhat scared.

When Lady Bellamy reached Rewtham House, she went straight to her husband's study. He received her with much politeness, and asked her to sit down.

"I have come to consult you on a matter of some importance," she said.

"That is, indeed, an unusual occurrence," answered Sir John, rubbing his dry hands and smiling.

"It is not my own affair: listen," and she gave him a full, accurate, and clear account of all that had taken place with reference to George's determination to marry Angela, not omitting the most trivial detail. Sir John expressed no surprise; he was a very old bird was Sir John, one for whom every net was spread in vain, whether in or out of his sight. Nothing in this world, provided that it did not affect his own comfort or safety, could affect his bland and appreciative smile. He was never surprised. Once or twice he put a shrewd question to elucidate some point in the narrative, and that was all. When his wife was finished, he said,

"Well, Anne, you have told a very interesting and amusing little history, doubly so, if you will permit me to say it, seeing that it is told of George Caresfoot by Lady Bellamy; but it seems that your joint efforts have failed. What is it that you wish me to do?"

"I wish to ask you if you can suggest any plan that will not fail. You are very cunning in your way, and your advice may be good."

"Let me see, young Heigham is in Madeira, is he not?"

"I am sure I do not know."

"But I do," and he extracted a note-book from a drawer. "Let me see, I think I have an entry somewhere here. Ah! here we are. 'Arthur P. Heigham, Esq., passenger, per \_Warwick Castle\_, to Madeira, June 16.' (Copied from passenger-list, \_Western Daily News\_.) His second name is Preston, is it not? Lucky I kept that. Now, the thing will be to communicate with Madeira, and see if he is still there. I can easily do that; I know a man there."

"Have you formed any plan, then?"

"Yes," answered Sir John, with great deliberation, "I think I see my way; but I must have time to think of it. I will speak to you about it to-morrow."

When Lady Bellamy had gone, the little man rose, peeped round to see that nobody was within hearing, and then, rubbing his dry hands with infinite zest, said aloud, in a voice that was quite solemn in the intensity of its satisfaction,



"The Lord hath delivered mine enemies into mine hand."